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ABSTRACT

Gang membership and violence are pervasive across the United States. Today children, adolescents and young adults of all social classes and environments are susceptible to gang involvement. Gang members are getting younger and gang leaders are getting older. The composition and structure of the family is examined for the common element between inner-city gangs and those in rural and suburban communities. Father figures and/or positive male role-models appear to be absent from the lives of a significant number of gang-involved youth; but a predilection toward gang involvement is also evident in young men whose fathers have been present but detrimental in their lives. Structured interviews were combined with process recordings and recollections of case studies to investigate the premise that absent fathers contribute to a boy's decision to join a gang. A table summarizes the relationship between gang membership, criminal activity, and family related information for 28 cases. The father's place and timing of his departure from the family had a profound impact on the child's development of identity, role in the family, and social relationships. The need for future research, difficulties of conducting research with gangs, and implications for intervention planning are considered. (Author/EMK)

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# Pre-Teen Gang Members: The Father Connection

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## Abstract

Gang membership and violence are pervasive across America. Gang members are getting younger and gang leaders are getting older. The connection between gangs, drugs, and quick cash are obvious, but the composition and structure of the family needs to be examined to find the common element between inner-city gangs and those in rural and suburban communities. The absence of the father or his abandonment of the pre-adolescent may be an all too common factor that establishes the gang as the provider of support, identity, nurturance, and acceptance of the child at a vulnerable period in his development.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

**Pre-Teen Gang Members: The Father Connection**

Newspaper headlines over the past few years have been filled with shocking stories of gang violence among children and young adolescents. While inner-city streets have become war zones, gang influence reaches beyond the housing projects and poverty stricken ghettoes. Gangs operate in all corners of America. One of the grim realities of this escalating gang activity is the demographic shift in the age and involvement of gang members. Gang leaders are getting older and gang "soldiers" are getting younger. An anti-gang counselor in Chicago estimates that 80 percent of boys, aged 13 to 15, in his south side area are involved in gangs.

Why this dramatic increase in younger hard-core members? The widely-held view is that access to drugs and the significant rewards of the drug trade are putting money into the pockets of kids who live in poverty. While there is no denying the connection between gangs, drugs, and the appeal of quick cash, it is the deterioration of family and neighborhood systems and decreases in social services that exacerbate the problem. Poverty and the desire to meet basic economic and physical needs may account for gang membership in urban environments, but fails to answer the question: Why is there an increase in gang involvement among suburban, middle-class adolescents?

There are many factors to consider in understanding why young people are drawn into gang membership. These include: low self-esteem; a desire for power, recognition, and status; protection; the need to belong to something; and the satisfaction of feeling an affiliation to a specific group. The gang, then, is meeting needs previously believed to be met within the family. However, the composition, structure, and functioning of today's family is having a

negative impact on children. This paper represents observations recorded over a period of more than ten years in our counseling work with young adolescents, aged 13 to 17 in two Chicago suburban communities where there is a highly visible gang presence. These young people were already involved in gangs and initial observations indicated that fathers were absent from the home in most cases. Upon further interviewing and in reviewing process recordings, we found that many of the young people had had relationships with their fathers early in life, but that the father had left the home at some point during their pre-adolescent years. The emotional impact reported by the young men to the counselors varied according to individual circumstances, but an overriding impression left with the counselors was the significant loss that had been experienced. There were also cases of fathers or father-figures who were present in the home but who were ineffective or negative influences. The informal discussions which took place in several graduate research and counseling supervision classes at National-Louis University among the authors led to the development of this study and further exploration of previous research in this area.

**Family Factors and the Father Connection**

Gang membership is no longer relegated to ethnic minority youth (Asians, African-Americans, Latinos, etc.) from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. All children, adolescents, and young adults are susceptible to gang involvement. Gang members cross all ethnic, racial, cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic boundaries (Duhon-Sells, 1995).

American children are being increasingly left physically and emotionally without adult supervision and support. While children of poor parents are neglected because their parents are exhausted and, frequently, physically absent from the home as they work long hours to make ends meet, middle-and upperclass parents are so caught up in making money and pursuing their

careers they are failing to make the time and emotional investments necessary to ensure that their children feel loved and valued. This breakdown of the family support system has been exacerbated by socioeconomic factors such as divorce and the prevalence of single-parent families. Almost fifty percent of all children are expected to experience the divorce of their parents and to spend about five years in a single-parent household. Of young adolescents in stepfamilies, twenty-eight percent will experience the end of that family within five years due to divorce (Lingren, 1996).

To compensate for this lack of family stability and parental supervision and emotional support children are seeking surrogate families and parental role models through their involvement in gangs. Lloyd (1985) cited alienation from parents as an initial cause of adolescents turning toward delinquency and gang membership. A dysfunctional family system is one of the common traits of gang members identified by many researchers (Capuzzi & Gross,1996; Clark, 1992; Duhon-Sells, 1995; Gardner, 1992; Klein, 1995; Monti, 1994; Oliver, 1995; Webb, 1995). However, the specific link between the father-child relationship and gang involvement is more controversial and tenuous than the more general variable of inadequate family support.

Carl Werthman, in his master's thesis, described many of the gang members as "highly aggressive, as a reaction to authoritarian fathers." Joan Moore, in her book, Going Down To The Barrio, stressed the presence of a father who was both inadequate and "grouchy". Walter Miller saw the aggression of gang youth as due to the absence of fathers, producing a female dominated household that required aggression to reassert one's manhood (Klein, 1995).

Father-figures and/or positive male role-models appear to be absent from the lives of a

significant number of gang-involved youth. But a predilection toward gang involvement is evident in young men whose fathers have been present but detrimental in their lives. Many gang members have been physically, psychologically, or sexually abused by fathers or father-figures while growing up. In a study of the entire population of a prison treatment program for youthful offenders, more than fifty percent of whom were admitted gang members, over half were raised by the mother only, the father having abandoned them at an early age. Those whose fathers were present typically suffered abuse from one or both parents, most often the father (Eisenman, 1993).

A study of seventy-one adolescent delinquents convicted of homicide yielded similar statistics. Of the seventeen cases examined for social factors, eleven were self-acknowledged gang members. Six of these eleven were from a one-parent family, three were from a two-parent family, one was from a stepparent family, two had criminal fathers, and two had alcoholic fathers (Busch, Zagar, Hughes, Arbit, & Bussell, 1990).

An older study of a middle- to upper-class "gang" of late adolescent youths, by Jeremiah Lowney, concluded that gang members viewed adults, particularly fathers, as uncaring, unreliable sources of love and support. Twenty-one of the twenty-three members of Lowney's study had divorced parents. Fathers were characterized as alcoholic, sadistic, workaholics who essentially rejected their sons when they left one family and formed another (Lowney, 1984). It is interesting to note the observations of this group of disenfranchised youth mirror the sentiments of "hard-core" gang members a decade later. Klein (1995) identified four characteristics of gang joiners and heavy participators, among them: "a deficit in useful adult contacts." The studies of these two researchers, Lowney and Klein, were conducted more than

ten years apart, in communities that were widely varied racially and socioeconomically. However, their findings concur: adult role models, particularly males, are lacking in the lives of young people who are drawn to gangs. A University of Nebraska study (1996) reported that from fifth to eighty-five percent of gang members come either from a single-parent home, or one in which no parent resides" (Lingren, 1996).

The literature supported our premise that absent fathers contributed to the decision of adolescents to join gangs. It also focused our attention on other negative father factors such as abusiveness, substance abuse, and weakness in fathers.

## Method

A set of questions was developed as part of a requirement for a research design class at National-Louis University that encouraged students to pursue areas of interest to them. The questions were crafted to obtain information that would allow for the coding of data points to foster better understanding of gang affiliation and other salient factors for involved youth. Several groups of adolescents were interviewed over the period of an academic year using an exploratory format designed to elicit specific responses and provide us with the information we had previously identified as being evident but speculative. We combined the results of these structured interviews with process recordings and recollections of case studies of the past ten years in order to draw some meaningful conclusions about the father connection.

## Discussion

Gang member family composition and structure results were often in agreement with what has been presented in the professional literature. The father's place and the timing of his departure from the family, according to the respondents, had a profound impact on their

development of identity, role in the family, and social relationships. The desire to control their environment and the need for external structure were identified as additional conduits to gang affiliation. Many young teens were already tangentially involved with gangs by the age of nine or ten because of gang presence in the community. However, when they experienced changes in family structure and were denied involvement with their father, or father-figure, they increased their commitment and involvement with older gang members. Additionally, some of the boys had even had to assume the role of family protector and father figure at home and cope with all the pressures these roles imply. Table 1 illustrates, dramatically, the connection between a negative male presence or absence of positive male role-models and the propensity for gang related behavior. These results mirror the sociological considerations, regarding gang-involved youth, demonstrated in the literature. Nevertheless, not all children who are victims of negative social conditions and single-parent families become gang members; and not all gang members are victims of the identified negative social and familial conditions.

**Implications for Intervention Planning**

Clinicians and others who seek to intervene or plan programs for gang-involved youth must have a working knowledge of the gang culture and language. The gang is often involved in illegal activities and it is necessary to build trust and a strong rapport with gang members before attempting to suggest behavioral changes or alternatives to gang involvement. The gang is a closed society which is difficult to penetrate. In attempting to gain an understanding of the needs and feelings of gang members, one must be prepared to make a long-term commitment. It is a process which takes patience on the part of those who would seek to intervene.

One of the most important considerations for developing programs aimed at gang

prevention and education of youth who are at risk for gang involvement can be found in understanding the impact of the family system on the developing adolescent. A necessary component of any successful counseling intervention program for gang prevention and awareness should be the recognition of the significance of the child's need for strong, male role models and father figures. A program that would aggressively include the father or a big brother or other male family member in a mentoring situation may be beneficial to the young person over the long run. Programs such as "Big Brothers" may be a good place to start, but the strategy must include a highly assertive training program for the participants.

The success and effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs is dependent upon understanding all the factors associated with gang membership. But it is the education and involvement of the family system, and specifically, the adult males, in the process, that is crucial. Families must be encouraged to communicate openly and to respect the needs of all members of the family. Parents should be exposed to supportive parenting techniques. They may need to learn how to enhance their child's self-esteem and create the feeling of belonging that is essential for healthy emotional development.

Fathers must be not only encouraged to be part of anti-gang programming, they must be pressured by community, religious, and educational leaders to take an active role in their children's lives. Reinforcing the importance of the father's role in raising a child is the key to stemming the growth and popularity of gangs. The Million Man March laid the groundwork for the reaffirmation of fathers and adult males in the African-American community. Many men who participated in this event took the message back to their communities that husbands and fathers must redouble their efforts and commitments on behalf of their children and their families. Former rival gang members

publicly denounced their violent pasts and engaged in dialogues with one another about how to recruit and rehabilitate "gangbangers" and involve them in programs to help them get away from gang life. More community level efforts initiated and implemented by adult males are needed.

**Conclusion**

There is little dispute among those who have studied gang-involved youth that family dynamics and configuration are relevant and significant. While they cannot be isolated from other identified risks for potential gang participation, they must be considered important factors in the study of gang behavior and the development of prevention and intervention programs.

Writing about African-American ghetto life, more than thirty years ago, Kenneth B. Clark, in his book, Dark Ghetto, wrote: "The child without a secure family life is forced either into aggression and delinquency or into apathy and despair (Clark, 1965). His words take on a broader meaning in today's world where children from all ethnic groups are growing up in families that are not meeting their needs for love, security, and guidance. The gang has become a substitute family (Oliver, 1995). Psychologists, social workers, educators, and community activists who are looking for answers to the problem of gang proliferation must look to the education and support of the family and the reintegration of the father into the family system for the answers to this growing societal malady.

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**Table 1. Summary of salient gang and family related information.**

| # | Ethnicity | Age of exposure | Age of joining | Adult/family authority figures in the home | Family Information | Criminal Activity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Latino | 10 | 13 | 2 parent family | father rarely home, truck driver | probation - theft, selling drugs |
| 2 | AfrAm | 13 | 13 | mother, grandmother | mother works nights | involved in two drive-by shootings; probation for possession of weapon/drugs |
| 3 | White | 12 | 14 | father | mother broke neck in fall downstairs while drunk | incarcerated for assault, battery, and attempted theft |
| 4 | AfrAm | 10 | 10 | mother | father incarcerated for murder; older brother released from second jail stay in 7 years | arrests and juvenile detention for grand theft auto and series of lesser charges |
| 5 | AfrAm | 13 | 14 | mother | parents divorced when respondent was 14 | incarcerated for armed robbery; arrested while awaiting trail for grand theft auto |
| 6 | AfrAm | 10 | 12 | mother, aunt | parents never married | known drug dealer, on probation for several drug related charges |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | AfrAm | 12 | 14 | mother, mother's boyfriend | father left the home when child was 10; no contact with father | expelled from school for fighting, mob action using a weapon; on probation |
| 8 | AfrAm | 14 | 15 | 2 parent family | Parents are professionals. Family has always been together | arrests and convictions for possession of marijuana, heroin, and cocaine; selling heroin; grand theft auto and rape; probation for all charges |
| 9 | AfrAm | 14 | 15 | grandmother, mother | Father died of cancer while child lived with him. Mother kept him from seeing father most of his childhood. | minor arrests, curfew, loitering |
| 10 | AfrAm | 10 | 11 | mother | Father in home until child was 10. Mother kicked him out. No contact. | served 6 months in juvenile detention for murder after he shot and killed a 13 year old friend. This occurred while he was on probation for assault of a street person, repeatedly stabbing him with a knife. |
| 11 | Latino | 11 | 13 | older sister, mother | father left the home when child was 8. No contact. | served time in juvenile detention home for selling cocaine and marijuana |
| 12 | AfrAm | 11 | 13 | mother | father in and out of home when child was 5 or 6. No contact. | minor arrests for curfew, loitering; expelled in first month of 9th grade for gang fighting in school |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13 | AfrAm | 13 | 14 | 2 parent family | father is 60. works nights. mother works nights | no arrests; court referrals for truancy |
| 14 | AfrAm | 11 | 13 | mother, grandmother | lived in Chicago | selling drugs |
| 15 | Hispanic | 14 | 14 | 2 parent family | family gang history | armed robbery; mob action |
| 16 | AfrAm | 14 | 14 | 2 parent family | step-father present | battery; mob action |
| 17 | Hispanic | 11 | 12 | 2 parent family | drugs | theft |
| 18 | AfrAm | 12 | 13 | mother | alcoholism | assault/battery |
| 19 | White | 14 | 14 | mother | economic disadvantage | assault/battery |
| 20 | AfrAm | 12 | 12 | mother | alcoholism | theft |
| 21 | AfrAm | 13 | 14 | father | alcoholism | battery; mob action |
| 22 | AfrAm | 12 | 13 | mother | drugs | battery; mob action |
| 23 | AfrAm | 14 | 15 | mother | no contact with father | selling drugs |
| 24 | AfrAm | 11 | 12 | mother | economic disadvantage | assault/battery |
| 25 | AfrAm | 10 | 12 | mother | alcoholism; no contact with father | battery; mob action |
| 26 | AfrAm | 12 | 12 | mother | family gang history | theft |
| 27 | AfrAm | 13 | 13 | father | no contact with mother | selling drugs |
| 28 | AfrAm | 13 | 14 | mother | alcoholism | selling drugs |